

Group's offers to turn in absentee ballots legal, but caution advised

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An elections practice by the League of Conservation Voters is apparently legal, but also the cause of some concern among Missoula voters.

Canvassers with the League are going door to door in Missoula offering to take people's absentee ballots and deliver them to the Missoula County Elections Office. Jeff Gohringer, national press secretary for the League, described the "service" in an email to the Missoulian on Thursday.

"This service has been provided by Republican and Democratic candidates in Montana since no-excuse absentee voting became the law in Montana in 2002," Gohringer said.

The League office in Montana did not return a call by press time for questions about the activity, the training for people who collect ballots, and how the League guarantees ballots end up in the proper hands. A Montana spokesman said he would either return a call or have a national spokesman return a call; the national press secretary subsequently sent the prepared statement and a news release it plans to send Friday.

This past weekend, a young person who identified himself as part of the group knocked on the door of Susanna Sonnenberg in Missoula. She is registered as an absentee voter.

"He had a big button on that said, 'I voted absentee,'" Sonnenberg said.

He shared accurate information with her about where she could take her ballot, Sonnenberg said, but he also made another offer: "He said, 'I, however, am licensed to receive your ballot, and I can take it for you. And if you know how you're going to vote already, I would be happy to wait here while you fill it out.'"

Sonnenberg has heard of people in other states collecting ballots and dumping them, and she declined the offer. The man also said he was "far more reliable" than the U.S. Post Office.

"I said, 'Good for you. But I'm not going to do that,'" Sonnenberg said.

Missoula County elections administrator Vickie Zeier said the practice is new this election season, and she's getting a few calls a day about it. It isn't prohibited by law, but she recommends people be cautious when they turn over their ballots to anyone.

"There are a lot of people that aren't happy with the process," Zeier said.

Some people believe county employees are going door to door, but Zeier said they aren't and don't have time. She isn't aware of a licensing requirement, and she said it's possible anyone could knock on doors and make the same offer.

Zeier said she hasn't had problems with the postal service, but the closer it gets to the election, the better it is for people to drop off ballots themselves instead of mail them.

So far, people affiliated with the League have dropped off 259 ballots to the Missoula County Elections Office, she said. She encouraged voters to track their ballots on the "My Voter" page at app.mt.gov/voterinfo to see if it's arrived.

"I would say if you hand over your ballot to someone that you do not know, you should definitely be checking the My Voter page and following and tracking that ballot," Zeier said.

Terri McCoy, communications director for the Montana secretary of state, said the practice is legal, but voters should not feel pressured to hand over their ballots. If they do, she said, ensure that absentee ballots are properly sealed and secured in a secrecy envelope. The package has the voter's signature, which must be verified as well.

"It's perfectly legal, and there are safeguards in place to protect against any type of fraud," said McCoy, who hasn't heard of a single ballot being misplaced to date.

Because election day is around the corner, she encouraged people to return ballots in person instead of putting them in the mail. Ballots must be returned by 8 p.m. on election day.

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